

Take co-operative approach to assessing security risks

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Australian universities, government agencies with research centres and individual researchers are in the spotlight today as research collaboration with the People's Republic of China across several disciplines, especially technology, is questioned.

Why? In part because today everything China-related is scrutinised with a suspicious lens; and in part because as an authoritarian one-party state the Chinese authorities can use well-meaning researchers for purposes that are contrary to Australian values.

The government and the university sector recognise the challenge. In August they set up a foreign research collaboration working group, comprising university members and government officials, under the new University Foreign Interference Taskforce. The working group will develop best practice guidelines for international research collaboration.

This is an attempt to provide guidance to universities without formally legislating tighter controls on the export of technology via research collaboration.

Australia's university sector thrives on an open internationally collaborative environment. It would be folly to shut that down. So expansive legislation has been wisely resisted.

But, at the same time, researchers focused on emerging technology have real concerns their work will end up unwittingly aiding China's military build-up or, even worse, used

in human rights abuses occurring in Xinjiang in northwestern China. And current legislation as well as the guidelines from the working group simply will not deal with that challenge.

I argue in a China Matters Explores policy brief titled What Should Australia Do About Research Collaboration with the PRC? that the government should establish a permanent critical centre for research collaboration.

The centre would work across all levels of government, universities and stakeholders to identify and manage the risks arising from research collaboration. This is a more collaborative, tailored and flexible approach than is currently practised.

The centre would deal with the challenge in three ways.

First, it would assist researchers in assessing the security risks of an individual collaboration. This would not simply be within the narrow confines of whether an individual project complied with export control regulations but a holistic assessment of the project. The final decision to proceed would remain with the researcher.

Importantly, it would provide continual updates to the researchers after a collaboration has begun. New security risks are always arising and the centre would provide a permanent feedback mechanism between researchers and government.

Second, it would allow the universities' permanent representatives in the proposed centre to provide immediate feedback on policy discussions, enforcement challenges and cultural differences between the security services and universities.

Third, and most consequentially, the Australian government should create (and continually update) a list of sensitive technologies that are not covered by current export controls, to be determined jointly by a panel of academics and government officials within the critical centre for research collaboration.

This would not be for the purpose of export controls. Instead, it would trigger a more rigorous visa regime for foreign researchers and students working on these sensitive technologies.

This would allow the government to screen foreign nationals working on dual-use technologies in Australia rather than set up artificial demarcations around individual technologies that have a wide variety of applications.

In my view, under this system the vast majority of those visas would be granted. The Department of Home Affairs needs to allocate its resources to ensure the visa application process is predictable and timely. After all, Australia wants to maintain an open and attractive environment for research collaboration.

The centre will not reduce the risk to zero. Nothing can. But it is a sensible and inclusive approach to mitigate risk. It allows for continued open international research collaboration that will boost Australia's technological and economic capacity.

At the same time, it provides researchers with greater understanding of the dual-use risks. It also would function as a forum for all the stakeholders to give feedback on policy formulation and implementation.

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